The Bizarre History of MK-Ultra & CIA Mind Control

The feds tried to use LSD for mind control — it didn't work.

Dan Simms Last Updated: April 13, 2022

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A faction of the American government, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), once experimented with psychedelics on unknowing citizens in a top-secret project called MK-Ultra.

Below, we'll be discussing how MK-Ultra was started, the goal of its experiments, and the harrowing twists and turns the experiments took until they were defunded in 1973.

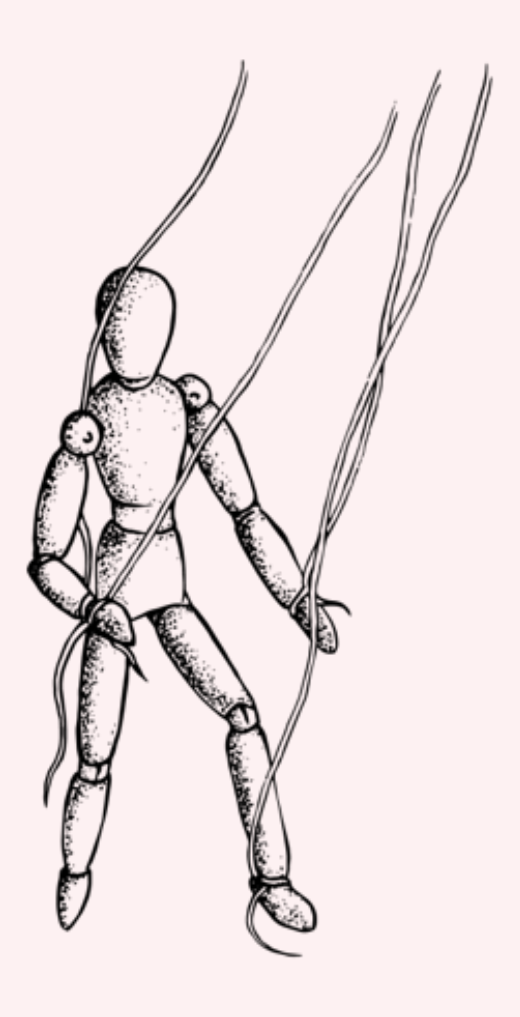
What is MK-Ultra?

"MK-Ultra" is the name of a highly classified project started by the CIA.

The project began in 1953 when American government officials were concerned that their opponents in the Cold War were (reportedly) using psychedelic drugs to gain mind control over prisoners of war.

The project lasted from 1953 to about 1973, when details of the experiments were leaked to officials throughout the CIA and other government branches.

By 1975, a full investigation was underway on the project, its history, and its leaders.



How Did MK-Ultra Start?

MK-Ultra was started in an effort to master mind control [1] before other countries during the Cold War.

Researchers at the time believed they could use psychedelics and extreme torture methods to destroy a person's ego. Once the ego was dissolved, repeated messages, ideas, and mantras could be fed to the subject to build a new ego with a decided purpose.

Sidney Gottlieb is often regarded as the father of MK-Ultra. He was the researcher and chemist in charge of the experiments and is credited with bringing LSD to America.

What Psychedelics Were Used in MK-Ultra?

With the direction of Sidney Gottlieb, countless experiments took place under MK-Ultra that included lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD).

Other drugs used for experimentation included psilocybin and psilocin ("magic mushrooms"), mescaline, barbiturates, amphetamines, heroin, and 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, also known as ecstasy).

In addition to psychedelics, researchers working under MK-Ultra also used torture methods, electroshock "therapy," and psychological manipulation [2].

Sidney Gottlieb

The History of MK-Ultra Experiments

MK-Ultra experiments persisted for about 20 years, from 1953 through 1973. Many test subjects didn't know they were being tested and were secretly administered psychedelics or exposed to psychological torture unwillingly.

Below are some of the more famous experiments carried out by MK-Ultra.

1. Early Experimentation

Much of the early MK-Ultra experimentation consisted of dosing subjects with LSD and either watching how they reacted or attempting to put ideas or mantras in their minds as a preliminary form of mind control.

The researchers went on to more intense forms of testing and torture after deciding that LSD was too unpredictable and unreliable.

LSD Coming to America

Around 1953, Sidney Gottlieb set out to buy the entire world's supply of LSD for experimentation. He reportedly financed his purchases with nearly a quarter-million dollars of government funds from the CIA and proceeded to purchase LSD from any source he could find.

Once procured, Gottlieb began distributing it in many different settings to see its effects in various doses. His earliest experiments included dosing college students and inmates with LSD to see how they were affected.

Unsuspecting Test Subjects

Perhaps one of the most disturbing facts about MK-Ultra is that many of the experiments were carried out with test subjects who didn't know what they were taking [3].

The effects of LSD — especially any long-term effects — were largely unknown at the time, but the lack of research didn't stop Gottlieb from giving the drug to anyone he could.

Famously, Ken Kesey — author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* — accepted LSD indirectly from Gottlieb and began carrying out tests of his own. His experiments, which he called "acid tests", involved offering LSD to fellow college students at parties to see how it changed their perception and mood.

Gottlieb had many ways of procuring new human test subjects for his experiments throughout MK-Ultra's existence.

One of his earlier methods was using patients of mental institutions and hospitals for people with drug addictions. Early on, he used patients at the Addiction Research Center in Kentucky who were already addicted to drugs. **Many of them were unaware that these experiments were taking place.**

Whitney Bulger's Treatment

Whitney Bulger was the leader of the Winter Hill Gang in Massachusetts.

After Bulger was arrested, he agreed to become a test subject in the MK-Ultra program to have his sentence reduced. He was told that the drug was for treating schizophrenia. He was dosed with LSD more than 50 times — according to his own reports.

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Whitney Bulger

Bulger was eventually released from prison but returned for numerous counts of murder following his "treatment". He recalled in letters from jail that the doctor who administered his dose of LSD and monitored his reaction would repeatedly ask him leading questions, including if he would ever consider killing anyone.

Collaboration With German Nazis & Japanese Torture Specialists

Most people look back at the axis powers of World War II and acknowledge that their actions toward other human beings, specifically in concentration camps, were inhumane, grotesque, and often unimaginable. What many Americans don't know is that the CIA called on the torture specialists who worked within those camps to help them carry out experiments for MK-Ultra.

Gottlieb and his team of researchers not only mimicked many of the experiments that took place in the concentration camps of WWII, but they also hired so-called "experts" in torture and human experimentation as consultants for MK-Ultra tests.

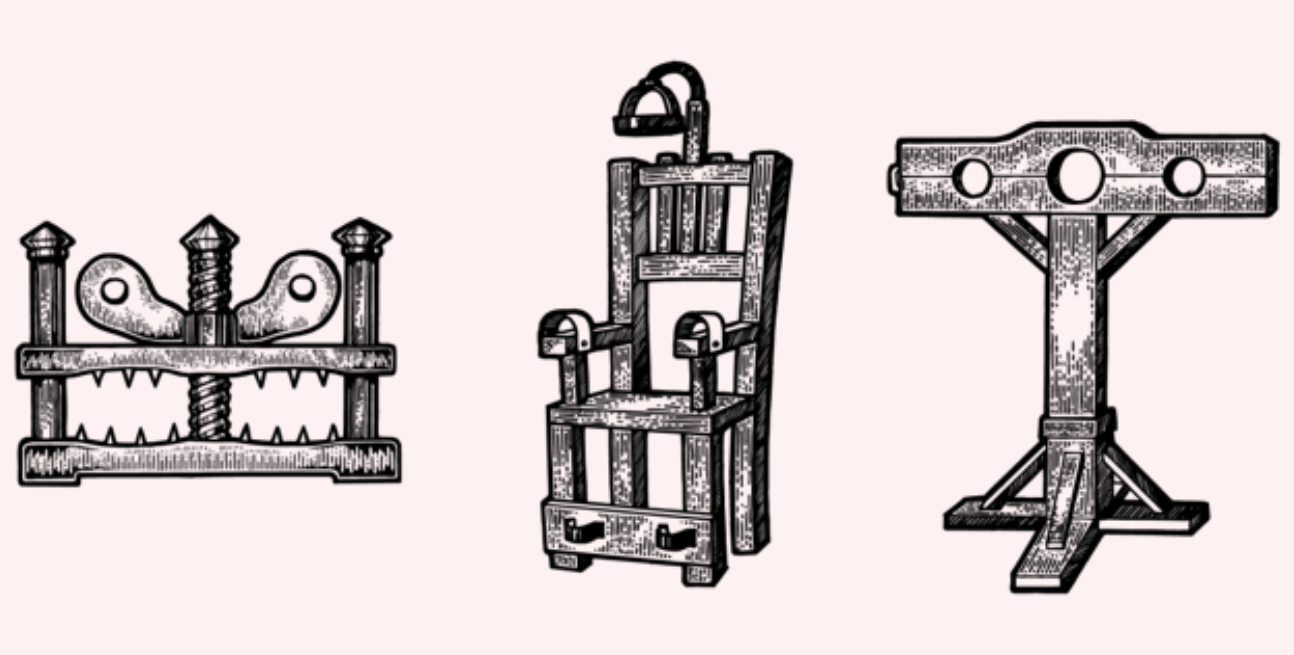
2. International Experimentation

Some of the more grotesque and unbelievable MK-Ultra experiments took place outside of America, mainly in Canada and Western Europe.

Gottlieb's European Experiments

Gottlieb is noted to have carried out extensive experimentation in Europe. Reportedly, he and his team of researchers sought out criminals — both convicted and soon-to-be-convicted — and got them to agree to the testing in exchange for reduced sentences. In some cases, they proceeded with testing even if the subjects refused.

His tests included offering them high doses of psychedelic drugs, depriving them of sleep for days at a time, using electroshock stimulation repeatedly to try to break down their sense of self, and a variety of other torture methods.



Neither the tests in America nor the ones taking place outside the country were ever under scrutiny by other parties in the CIA. Gottlieb carried out his experiments without limitations, restrictions, or reprimand for many years.

Canadian "Driving Experiments"

Donald Ewen Cameron was another experimenter working under MK-Ultra. He's best known for his Canadian "driving experiments," for which he would drive over the border to Canada to carry out tests on non-Americans in prisons and psychiatric hospitals.

The driving experiments were some of the most disturbing. Subjects were often placed into an involuntary coma for weeks or months at a time and delivered repeated messages while unconscious in an attempt to plant memories or ideas in their heads.

Heroic doses of LSD and other psychedelics were administered to unknowing or unwilling patients. Cameron would watch the subjects cope with hallucinations and put them through tests while they tripped to see how well they could perform.

He also experimented with paralytic drugs and intermittently administered electric shocks at many times higher than the standard power to see if the subject could overcome the paralytic state in which they were placed.

3. Other Bizarre and Cruel Experiments

Some of the more disturbing and upsetting experimentation took place on American soil in major cities like Manhattan and San Francisco.

Operation Midnight Climax

Operation Midnight Climax was a project that was set up in a way that would naturally dissuade subjects from discussing their experiences with others.

The CIA employed prostitutes to work at makeshift brothels set up by the government. The prostitutes were paid to solicit men on the streets, bring them back to the brothel, and administer a dose of LSD or another psychedelic.

Once dosed with the drug, the men were left in the room while CIA officials watched and recorded them from behind two-way mirrors.

The idea behind this set-up was to induce a traumatic experience in the men, but in a situation where they wouldn't want to discuss the experience with others [4].

Truth Experiments

In addition to mind control, the CIA worked tirelessly to find out if a variety of drugs could be used as a truth serum. Presumably, the CIA planned to use these methods in interrogations if they proved successful.

Many truth experiments involved different forms of psychological and physical torture, but among the most harrowing were those carried out with "uppers" and "downers".

Subjects would be hooked up to two IVs, one with barbiturates and the other with amphetamines. The former would be administered until the subject was nearly unconscious. The barbiturates would then be stopped, and amphetamines would be delivered to wake the subject up again.

Coming out of their drunken-like stupor from barbiturates, the subject would be energized by the amphetamines and would talk uncontrollably and often incoherently. The idea was to ask the subject questions once in this state of babbling to try to get the truth out of them.

Unfortunately, most of the subjects died from the drug interactions, so this type of testing was discontinued.

Long-Term LSD Dosing

Another bizarre and inhumane experiment involved dosing subjects with LSD daily for long periods. In some cases, subjects received an average or above-average dose of LSD every day for more than two months straight.

Gottlieb used this testing method to see the long-term effects of LSD and if repeated hallucinations or psychedelic experiments would gradually deconstruct one's sense of self.

The End of MK-Ultra & Its Aftermath

MK-Ultra experiments came to an end in 1973, about 20 years after they began. The project created a lot of room for conspiracy and distrust in the federal government that are still apparent today.

Destruction of MK-Ultra Records

By 1973, Gottlieb's superiors ordered the destruction of documents and records from the MK-Ultra project. Reports state that the destruction of documents was ordered because the CIA officials feared they would be declassified in the wake of the Watergate Scandal.

It's believed that most of the documentation was destroyed from the CIA's archives before the information was released to government officials and the public. However, some 20,000 documents remained and were investigated by officials and attorneys.

Frank Church, a lawyer and Senator from Idaho, formed the "Church Committee," a group dedicated to the exposure of MK-Ultra and related CIA projects. The Church Committee helped complete the CIA's investigation and eventually pressured the president at the time, Gerald Ford, to put new laws in place to protect future subjects from such treatment.

Presidential Order for Transparency

In 1976, under advisement from the Church Committee, President Gerald Ford presented an executive order, later referred to as the Presidential Order for Transparency.

President Gerald Ford

This order stated that any future tests and experiments involving humans and issued by the CIA or other government programs must be clear, transparent, and upfront with subjects about their intent and methods for experimentation.

The Rise of "Hippie Culture"

The "hippie" counterculture movement that defines American culture in the 60s and 70s was believed to have started as a direct result of Gottlieb's experiments.

Ken Kesey, mentioned previously, was introduced to LSD brought to America and specifically Stanford University.

Kesey's "acid tests" were typically accompanied by loud music, other drugs, and alcohol, and they served as the foundation for anti-establishment and hippie culture.

To say that LSD formed American culture in the 60s and 70s is not an exaggeration.

Criminalization & Demonization of Psychedelics

The effects of MK-Ultra persist into present-day America. As the counterculture hippie movement embraced psychedelics and opposed the US government, many people believe the government began demonizing LSD, psilocybin, and many other psychedelic drugs through propaganda. Some believe this was done as a means of maintaining control over the drugs and their potential capabilities [5].

Historians, conspiracy theorists, and advocates for legalizing psychedelics believe that the US government purposefully demonized psychedelics in an effort to fight back against the free-thinking hippie culture [6].

Psychedelics remain illegal throughout most of the United States. If MK-Ultra and the government's intention to keep control over the substances are to blame for their prohibition, then the CIA program has had a lasting effect on America for over 50 years.

Rumors & Conspiracy Theories Surrounding MK-Ultra

Unsurprisingly, there are countless rumors and conspiracy theories surrounding MK-Ultra, the experiments that took place, and whether or not the program is still in existence.

Below are some of the more popular ideas.

Conspiracy: Staged Suicide of Frank Olson

Frank Olson was a CIA employee who carried out research on biological warfare and bacteriology for the government. He reportedly was dosed with LSD while on a business trip for the CIA.

A few days after he was drugged, he was found dead after falling from his hotel window. An autopsy was completed and determined that the cause of death was suicide. However, Olson's family completed a second autopsy years later, which uncovered that his injuries were sustained prior to his fall.

Many conspiracy theorists believe that Olson's death in 1953 was a homicide related to the LSD drugging and his involvement with the CIA. It's unclear why he may have been killed.

Conspiracy: The Kennedy Assassination

When news of MK-Ultra and the project's bizarre experimentation surfaced, the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy in 1968 came under question.

Reports of the killer, Sirhan Sirhan, having been hypnotized or under mind control circulated quickly, and others insisted that he was a subject of the CIA's mind control program.

Sirhan Sirhan

Some police and bystander reports from the assassination suggest that he wasn't in control of his thoughts or actions. The link to MK-Ultra experimentation has not been substantiated and remains a conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy: Charles Manson as a Test Subject

As mentioned above, Whitney Bulger was a criminal who was unknowingly used in the CIA's LSD experiments. He was a criminal who was reportedly pushed to murder after repeated experimentation with high doses of LSD.

Charles Manson

Although there is no evidence suggesting its validity, many people believe that Charles Manson was another test subject that was led to murder. There are reports that Manson used similar tactics (including torture and LSD) to command his cult of followers too.

Conspiracy: Ongoing Testing

Finally, some people believe that MK-Ultra experiments didn't end in 1973 and instead continue to this day.

Some attribute mass UFO sightings and other phenomena to mass dosings, which the CIA had done in the past by adding LSD to a public water supply.

None of this has ever been substantiated.

Summary: What Was MK-Ultra?

MK-Ultra, the CIA's quest for mind control that began during the Cold War, led to a series of disturbing human experiments, many of which involved subjects who didn't know they were being tested. Directed by Sidney Gottlieb, experiments took place across America in colleges, prisons, and mental institutions, as well as internationally in Canada and Europe.

The project ceased in 1973 and was exposed to the public in 1975. The top-secret project led to the death of many people, countless lawsuits, and the Presidential Order for Transparency. Many people believe it also led to the counterculture hippie movement and the illegalization and demonization of psychedelics.

Unfortunately, many of the documents and results associated with the project were destroyed before they could be investigated. The resulting mystery has only served to fuel the many conspiracy theories and rumors surrounding the bizarre project.

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WRITTEN BY

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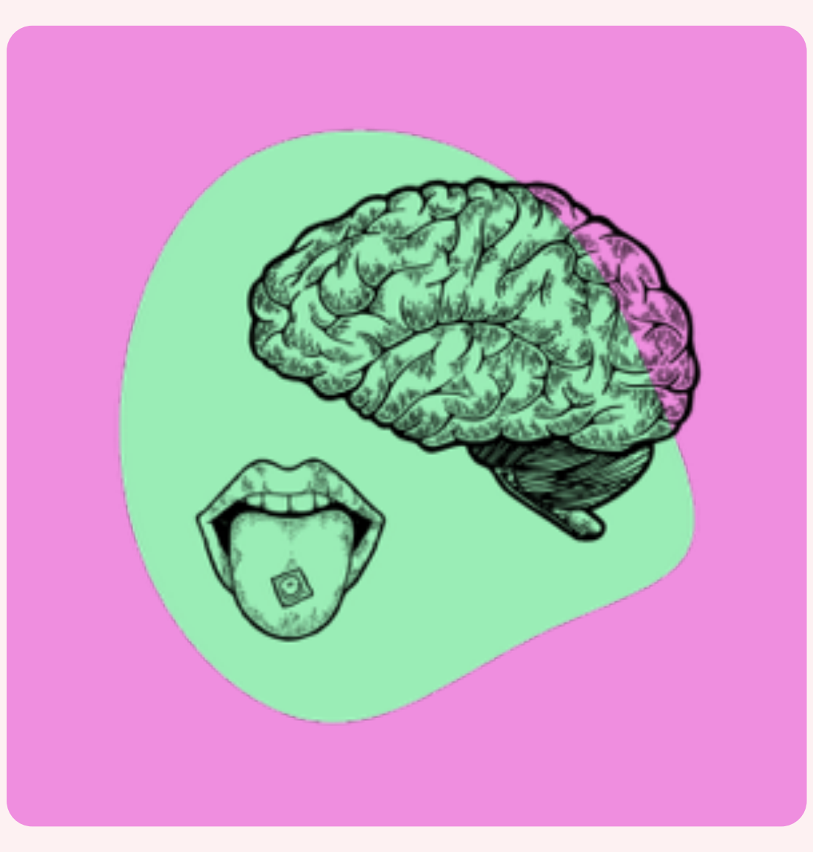
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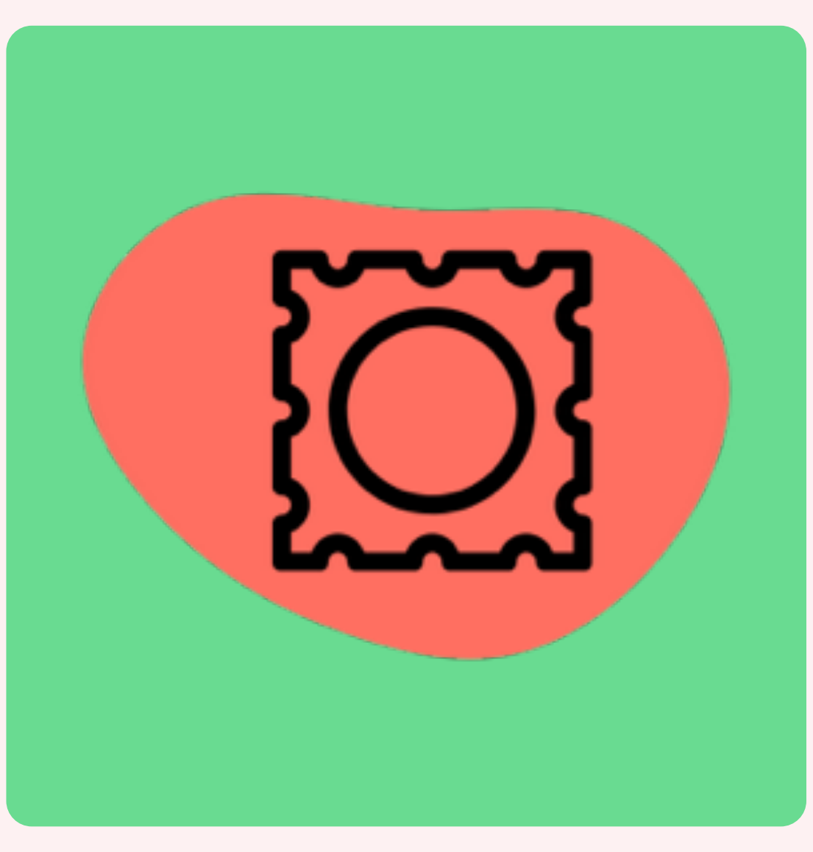
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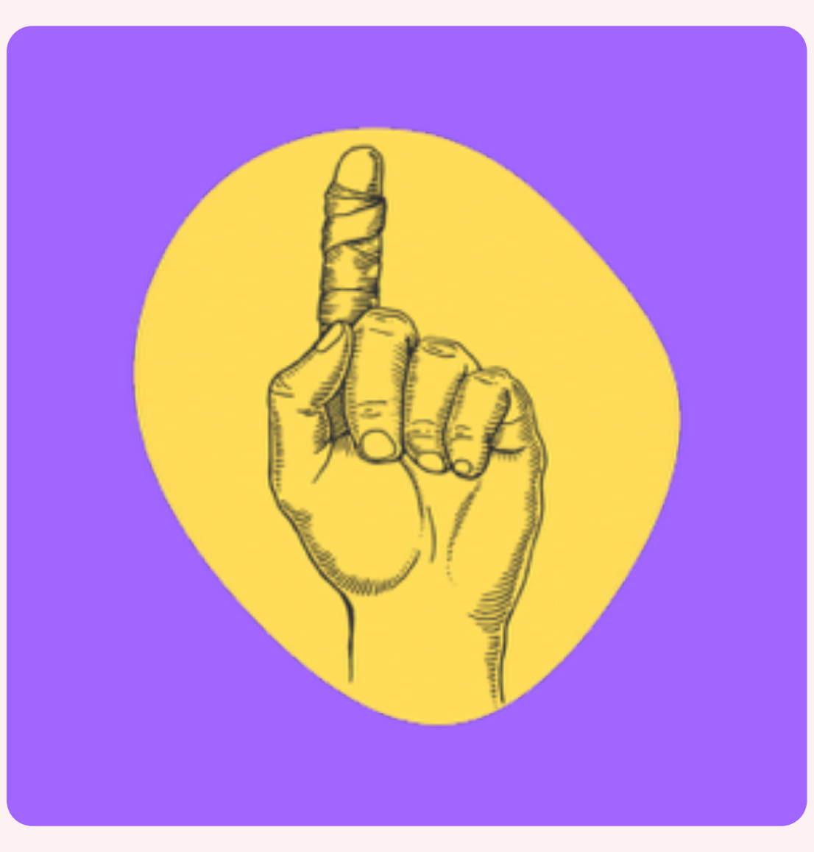
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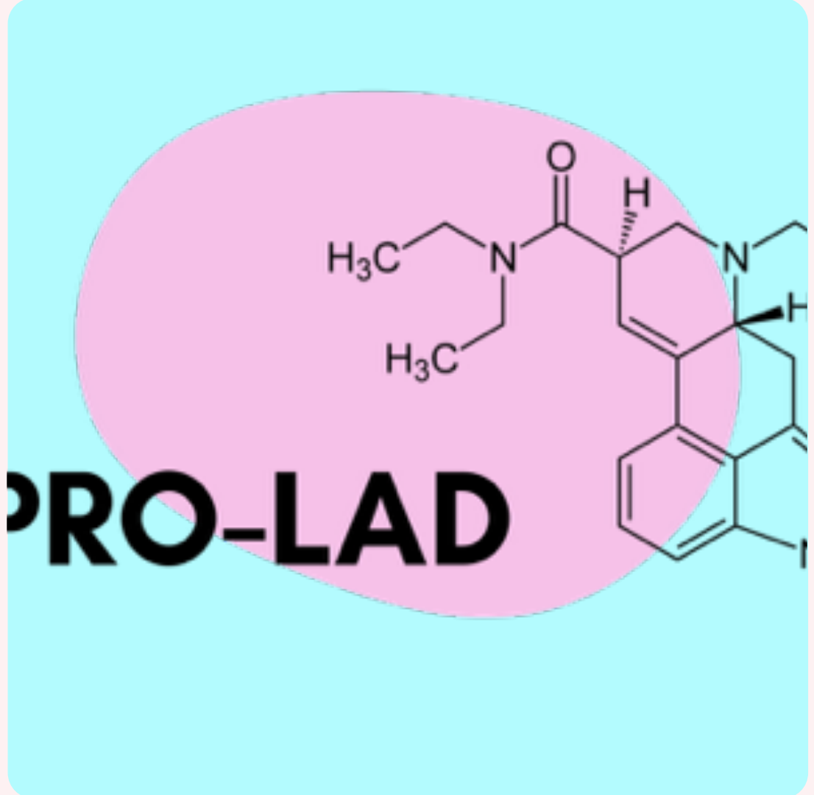

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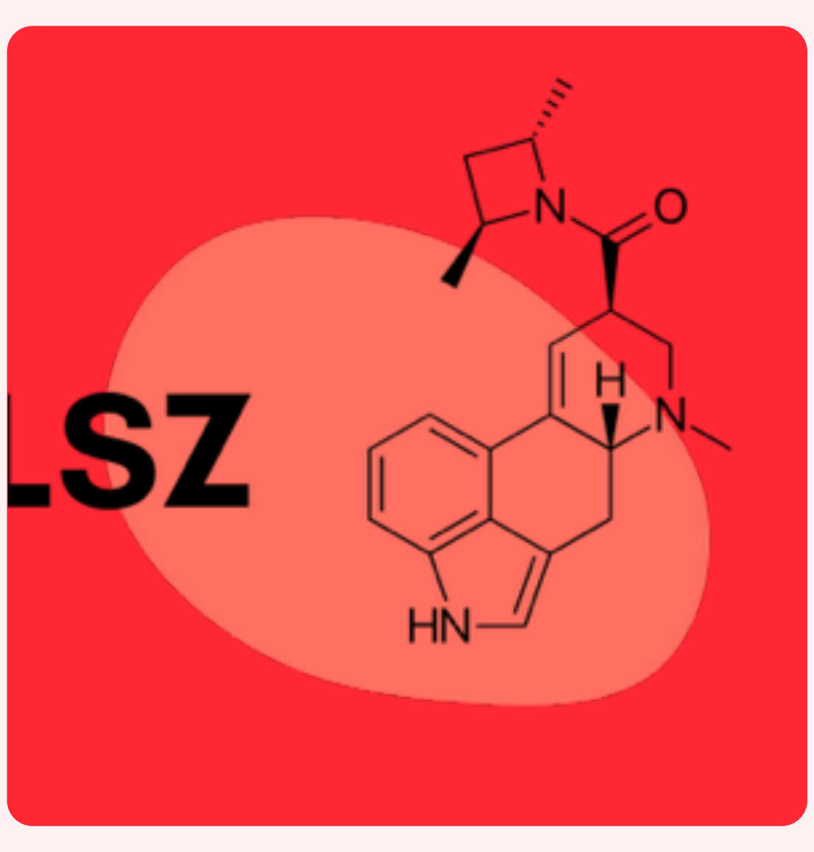

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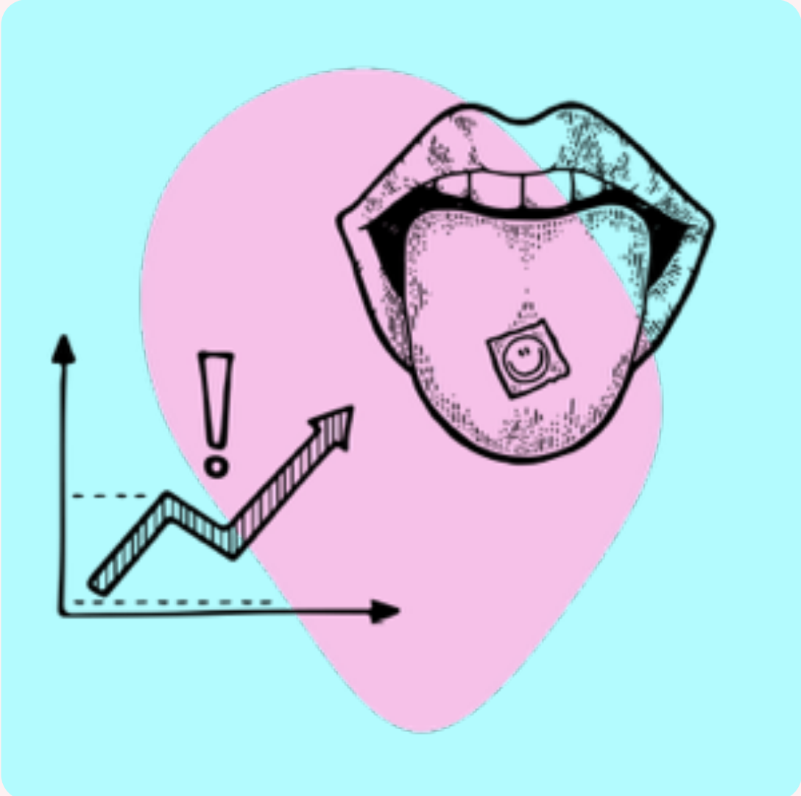
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